

Urban Core Committee Concept Paper

DRAFT- 11/08/05

Background

In the late 1990's, Houston responded to a need for urban style development by establishing separate standards for inner loop development that would allow smaller lots, reduced set backs, shared driveways, and density limitations. Developers embraced these rules and the character of housing and commercial development in the urban area has been changing steadily.

In fact, the demand for urban living has grown in such a way that Chapter 42 no longer responds fully to the concepts being promoted by developers, planners and the public. These concepts include transit oriented development, pedestrian amenities, mid-rise multi family housing and mixed use developments. To implement projects with these characteristics, developers must request a number of variances from the City's development regulations.

For more than six months, the Urban Core Committee discussed possible solutions in the form of Transit Corridor Planning, Performance Standards, and the potential impacts of allowing reduced right-of-way dedications on small, inner city streets. Following are the committee's recommendations.

Recommendations

1. *Transit Corridors.* Transit Corridor Planning seeks to address urban development in a coordinated fashion that reflects different needs and desires in different locations. It recognizes the complex conditions in the central city where more coordination and forethought are required to balance market forces, development and quality of life issues, especially in those areas where dense development is occurring near established residential areas. As high-capacity transit is extended into other areas of the city and if effective policies are put in place, the market can respond with additional urban development that can be balanced with the needs of nearby established neighborhoods. The proposal is based on an urban development pattern that emphasizes pedestrian access in addition to access by the automobile. Transit corridor development can achieve a rich mixture of uses in close proximity to one another because it anticipates convenient walking trips to those uses and to transit.

Transit corridor planning is intended to apply to high capacity transit corridors such as light rail and bus rapid transit routes. It is in these areas that new development pressures will be strongest.

There are three basic elements:

- ♦ Establishing planning frameworks
- ♦ Area specific modifications to regulations and ordinances
- ♦ Performance Standards

The framework, process, and ordinance modifications are described more fully in Attachment A while Attachment B provides more specific details for implementing Performance Standards. While the Committee embraces this concept, further discussion and testing is necessary. The Planning Commission should convene a special working group with representatives of all potential stakeholder groups to discuss the details and draft an ordinance allowing for Transit Corridor Planning.

2. Performance Standards. One of the three basic elements of Transit Corridor Planning described above, the Performance Standards concept is predicated on the idea that by meeting certain established criteria, new developments minimize their impact on the surrounding area and community as a whole. The standards to be applied would vary according to the proportion of residential uses that already exist in a given area. The more residential in character a neighborhood is, the more performance standards prospective non-residential uses would have to implement.

A subcommittee of Development Impacts, Urban Core, Neighborhood Preservation and Parking was created to review the Performance Standards proposal. Whether addressed through a free standing ordinance or as part of the transit corridor proposal, all agreed that incompatible uses should not locate in the heart of single family residential areas; however, committee members expressed a number of concerns when considering the implications of implementing such standards in cases where incompatible uses are and have always been adjacent to one another and along major thoroughfares (e.g. River Oaks Shopping Center on W. Gray and Highland Village on Westheimer). In these areas, increasing intensity and mix of uses may actually be encouraged. A concern is the apparent conflict between two goals: 1) encouraging mixed use, higher density urban development and 2) preserving the character of inner city single family neighborhoods.

The subcommittee recommended modifications to the Performance Standard concept so that it is applied appropriately in two very different circumstances:

1. To discourage incompatible land uses from locating in the heart of single family residential neighborhoods
2. To mitigate the impacts of expanding commercial corridors that are located appropriately along major thoroughfares at the edges of neighborhoods.

Little discussion is needed to establish performance standards addressing incompatible uses in the heart of established neighborhoods. The subcommittee recommends that Planning Commission propose appropriate amendments to Chapter 42 addressing this situation. On the other hand, the concept of

implementing performance standards to address the issue of adjacency requires more discussion. As a result, the Committee recommends Planning Commission establish a working group comprised of all appropriate stakeholders to carefully consider the proposed standards and any unintended consequences that may result if such standards are implemented.

3. Right-of-Way Dedication. As redevelopment occurs in the City's oldest neighborhoods, the Planning Commission is regularly asked to grant variances from the Chapter 42 requirement to dedicate enough ROW on existing streets to meet the standard of 50 feet. In many cases, existing pavement is very narrow, open ditch drainage exists, and homes are set back only 10 feet from the ROW. Many ask if the city can possibly widen such streets and disrupt existing development. Without a clear policy, decisions to grant such variance requests have resulted in a patchwork right-of-way dedication.

After considerable discussion, Committee members agreed that apart from meeting basic functional needs such as garbage pick-up, emergency response, and traffic circulation, ROW serves other important functions. These include providing a location for future utility expansion, wider sidewalks in pedestrian areas, room for street trees and landscaping and to provide space for future bikeways.

To ensure that old, established neighborhoods are preserved and recognizing that not all streets need to have a 50' right-of-way, the Committee recommends that Planning Commission further define the Street Hierarchy Classification System to include local streets. Such a system could establish some neighborhood streets as more pedestrian oriented, and not requiring a 50' right of way when wider parallel streets exist. On these streets, one-way pairs might be established to allow for adequate circulation, pedestrian safety, and space for tree planting.

Appendix A
Transit Corridor Planning Table

Appendix B

Performance Standards